

Testimony to the Montgomery County Council
FY 2023 Capital Budget and Supplemental Appropriations to the
FY 2023 Capital Budget and Amendments to the FY 2023-28 CIP
RE: Eliminating funding for the North High Street Extended project (P502310)
by Paul Geller, Community Advocate
Tuesday, February 7, 2023

President Glass, Vice President Friedson, Councilmembers Albornoz, Balcombe, Fani-González, Jawando, Katz, Luedtke, Mink, Sayles, and Stewart,

Please eliminate the \$1,332,000 in funding for the North High Street Extended project in Olney (P502310) in the FY2024 and FY2025 CIP capital budget. This project is problematic, very expensive, and will likely cause more crashes and injured/killed pedestrians, going against the county's Vision Zero plan. This funding is better spent on other projects such as funding an expansion of Bill 01-23 to provide property tax credits to seniors and retired military members.

As a long-time resident of an adjoining neighborhood, Olney Oaks, for many years I have frequently driven along Morningwood Drive near North High Street, occasionally bike ride past it, and regularly do business with several companies on North High Street. North High Street was designed this way for a very good reason – to keep traffic from a well-traveled business area away from a quiet neighborhood. No one wants people speeding out of McDonald's (located on the northwest corner of North High Street and Georgia Avenue) or burning rubber out of the Exxon station located at the southwest corner, barreling down North High Street, down a hill, and careening onto a very sharp/abrupt left or right turn on Morningwood Drive. Worse still, just yards away from this proposed, dangerous "T" intersection is The Goddard School for little kids and the many walkers who go to and from Olney Elementary School. Plus there are many other pedestrians using these sidewalks day and night. Proceeding with this project is a dangerous situation waiting to happen.

For years, many in this quiet area consisting of several neighborhoods have united in their disdain for this project. Two members of the Greater Olney Civic Association (GOCA) support it yet do not live near here. The bulk of the opposition has been from residents, especially in Homeland Village, a diverse, multicultural neighborhood right next to this project. One needs to ask if Racial Equity and Social Justice are being well served by this project since residents are opposed to this project for very well-founded safety reasons.

Realizing Vision Zero is the goal for the county, here are two facts reported in the North High Street Extension – Facility Planning Study virtual public meeting on September 30, 2020:

- 28 reported crashes in 5 years on Georgia Avenue within project limits (slide 15)
- 25% of crashes at the intersection with North High Street/Buehler Road (slide 15)

As a resident, let me shed some light on the potential danger of this very costly cut-through being incorrectly sold as a convenience to the neighborhoods along Morningwood Drive. In actuality, what will happen is residents will use the cut through on North High Street to bypass

the traffic signal at Morningwood Drive and 97/Georgia Avenue. This has not been mentioned in any of the county's reports. Some hasty drivers will take the North High Street bypass to turn northbound (left) on 97/Georgia Avenue so they do not have to wait for the traffic light at Morningwood and 97/Georgia Avenue. Drivers will also use this North High Street cut-through to avoid the traffic light, cross 97/Georgia Avenue, and get to the BP gas station and Safeway on Spartan Road faster. It also will be used to access the Dunkin' Donuts which already causes traffic backups (and plenty of agita) on southbound 97/Georgia Avenue each weekday morning.

Just trying to do some of these stunts listed above are going to create numerous additional opportunities for accidents to occur because the intersection at North High Street and 97/Georgia Avenue has no traffic light, features two lanes of swift moving traffic in each direction, combined with cars entering and exiting the BP gas station on the other side of the street, and very oddly placed disconnect with Buehler Road. In all my years living in this area, I only twice have tried this very dangerous, yet legal turn. Each time it requires nerves of steel to wait for the properly spaced opening, and to not be distracted by the traffic building up behind you. If this bypass road moves forward, more accidents and injuries are almost guaranteed to occur. Nowhere does DOT mention this.

Then there are the affected residents and businesses along North High Street.

One of the more popular businesses is an automobile service station that has long been a pillar of the community. It is also a very hard place to find a parking space for in order to drop your car off for repairs. If this project is built, at worst the street will not be widened. At best it will be expanded. Either way, because it will be more formally paved, cars awaiting service will inevitably be parked on North High Street, something impossible to do today, causing a dangerous narrowing of the street and an inability for two-way traffic to get by...thus negating any benefit of this project.

Then you have the McDonalds. Many people go to this restaurant, some taking advantage of their Byzantine drive-through set up. If this North High Street connection to Morningwood Drive is made, some cars are going to leave McDonald's, go careening down the street to a very sharp left or right turn on Morningwood. Inevitably, some inexperienced driver or Fast and Furious fan is going to flip their car at best (something that happened last month in front of the Exxon station), and hurt multiple pedestrians who use the nearby sidewalks day and night at worst. This is an accident waiting to happen. The nature of the downward slope of the land as it nears Morningwood Drive, combined with the narrowness of Morningwood Drive at this exact spot, are a recipe for disaster. Inevitably, at the total cost of \$2,169,000 someone is going to get killed in a traffic accident, car crash or pedestrian incident.

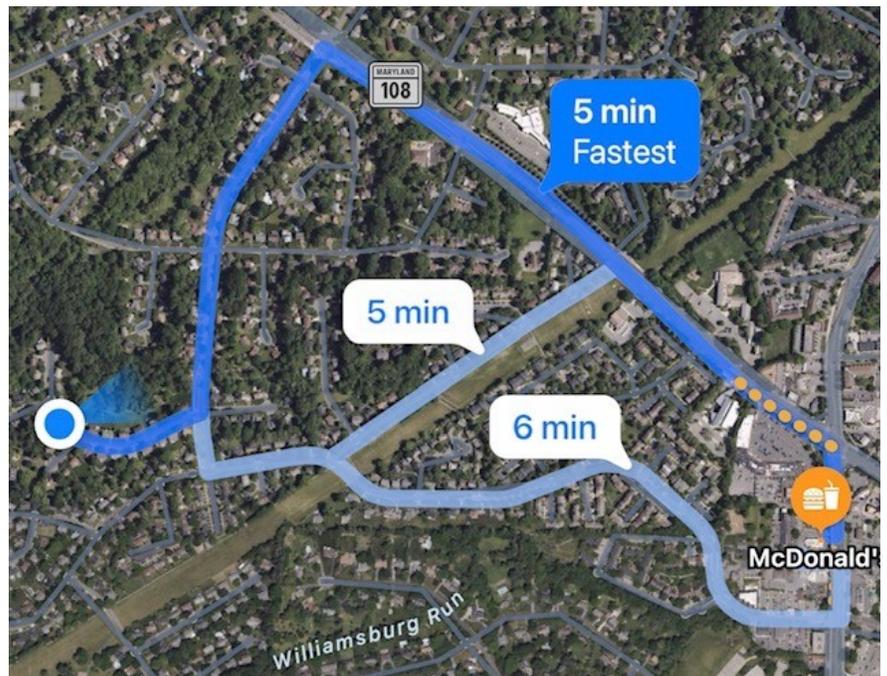
Having North High Street separated from Morningwood Drive causes traffic to self calm. The right hand turn from southbound 97/Georgia Avenue onto Morningwood Drive is very sharp, has no margin for error because of the narrowness of the road there, and requires a driver to pay full attention to what they are doing lest they hit another car head on driving eastbound on Morningwood, or hit The Backyard Naturalist building which basically abuts the road.

There is another key reason for canceling the North High Street Extended project. The data provided by the Department of Transportation is flawed because it lacks a basic understanding of the current traffic volume heading to North High Street that diverts onto Queen Elizabeth Drive, Headwaters Drive and Homeland Drive.

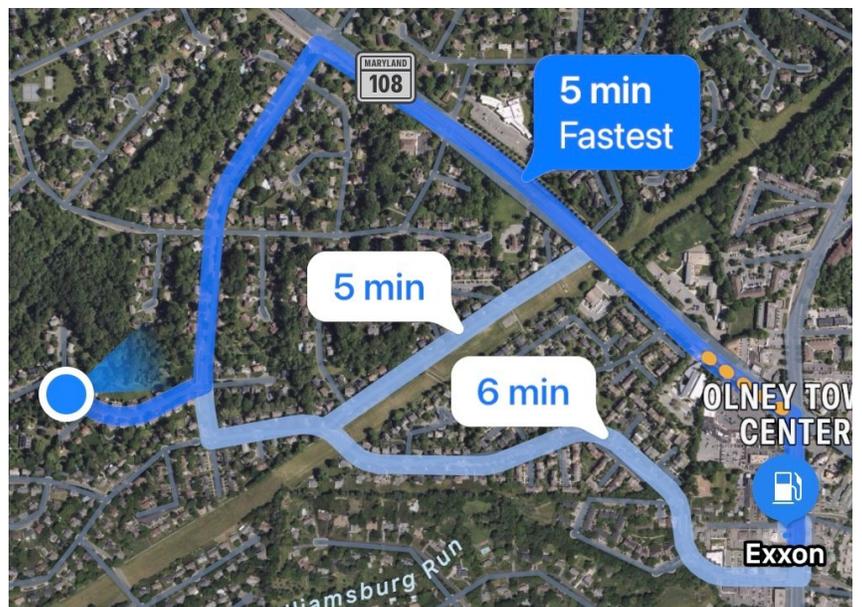
Today, residents of the Olney Oaks neighborhood (just west of Homeland Village and adjacent to the study area on the east) in the area bordered by Bilney Drive in the west, Morningwood Drive in the south, and Queen Elizabeth Drive on the east likely use Queen Elizabeth Drive to access North High Street. This is what my family has been doing for years to get to the mechanic, the orthodontist, McDonalds and the Exxon station.

However, do not take my word for it. Ask the expert, Siri. Here are her recommended routes to get to three of these locations. All three recommend the route me and my neighbors take.

Apple Maps provided the three fastest routes to McDonalds...always faster taking Queen Elizabeth or Headwaters.



And here is the route to Exxon. Also, always faster taking other roads.



And finally, to the orthodontist. This time, three faster routes are given, and none utilize Morningwood Drive at all.



Residents currently living in the remainder of Olney Oaks likely use both Queen Elizabeth Drive and Headwaters Drive to access North High Street, rather than driving down eastbound on Morningwood, waiting for the light at 97/Georgia Avenue, then driving northbound, followed by waiting at a dangerous intersection to make a left onto North High Street. This maneuver is dangerous, time consuming, and rarely done because of the high flow of southbound traffic on 97/Georgia Avenue at most times of the day and early evening.

Homeland Drive, another possible bypass, is a bottleneck of cars parked on both sides of a narrow street. This will be the fate of North High Street too. Unless you live here, you will likely be unfamiliar with this cut through, or avoid it if you have driven through it before. It is too narrow to safely navigate on a regular basis, and has a significant curve to it.

Yesterday, my eldest son and I went to the site of this boondoggle, and did some measuring of our own. The actual length of the connection between North High Street and Morningwood Drive is two inches shy of 60 feet. If you take that 60 feet, and divide it into the \$2,169,000 price tag for this project, the cost per foot is a staggering \$36,150; or \$3,012.50 per INCH.

The county's population as of 2021 was 1,054,827. Who among us can assert this one project, being advocated for by three people I know of, and reviled by so many in the Olney area, is worth \$2.05 from every resident in Montgomery County? Building a 60 foot long bypass so people can get to a fast food restaurant or grab a donut a minute faster? Inconceivable! This project factually makes zero sense and needs to be discontinued.

Please take the \$1,332,000 in FY2024 and FY2025 proposed for this project and invest it in providing property tax breaks to seniors and retired military members, placing solar panels on county buildings, helping our libraries, or expanding MCPS construction spending. Anything is a better use of funds than a 60 foot stretch of road costing \$36,150 a foot to build.

Thank you.

Paul Geller
ppgusa@hotmail.com